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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed the discourse of four pairs of students participating in dyadic interactive communicative tasks (ICTs) to discover if and how their discourse styles influenced the dynamics of interaction. Students were paired according to their teacher's evaluation of their discourse style as active or non-active, and were designated sender or receiver. Transcripts were analyzed of audiotaped sessions in which each pair attempted to duplicate a simple figure by verbal communication only. Results showed active students in all pairs scored high in the area of conversation management, regardless of their designation as sender or receiver, and that the communicative task was achieved by both pairs with mixed discourse styles in spite of the fact that the active students dominated. Results further showed that the pair of non-active students failed to successfully complete the task, and in fact gave up quickly, indicating that pairing non-active students will improve neither the quantity nor the quality of their participation. (Two tables of data are included.) (SR)

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The Importance of Discourse Style in Pairing Students for Interactive Communicative Tasks

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Abstract

As a result of research conducted by Alvarado (1992), Long (1981), Krashen (1987), and Doughty and Pica (1986) indicating that students' negotiation of meaning during interactive communicative tasks (ICTs) increases their proficiency, more study is required to help ESL teachers plan these types of activities for optimal outcomes. Many variables play roles in the success of the activity, one of which is the way that the students are assigned partners. Since the benefit of ICTs occurs because students are placed in a position to use the target language, teachers should provide each student with an equal opportunity to participate in the negotiation. To achieve equality, Alvarado believes discourse styles should be considered. Logic would lead teachers to pair students with similar styles to foster equal participation. However, Alvarado suggests that "pairing nonassertive students may not improve the quantity nor the quality of their participation" (p. 592). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze the discourse of four pairs of students participating in dyadic ICTs in order to discover if and how their discourse styles influenced the dynamics of interaction.

The methods included audiotaping students participating in ICTs that required them to duplicate a simple figure by verbal communication only with a limitation of five minutes. The students were paired according to the ESL teacher's evaluation of their discourse style as active or non-active, using Alvarado's classification: inclusion in the group of the five most and least active members of their classes. The pairs were arranged as follows:

	Sender	Receiver
Pair A:	Active Student	Active Student
Pair B:	Non-Active Student	Non-Active Student
Pair C:	Active Student	Non-Active Student
Pair D:	Non-Active Student	Active Student

Transcripts of the discourse were prepared and analyzed to categorize the speech production of each participant according to a method suggested by Alvarado and modified for specificity. The types of each contribution were totalled to determine the ranking of each participant.

The results showed active students in all pairs scoring high in the area of conversation management, indicating domination of the interaction. The non-active student in Pair D had an advantage as the sender but did not take the initiative, allowing the active student to manage the conversation. The non-active receiver in Pair C had an even lower conversation management score. Overall scores for Pairs A, C, and D signified the negotiation of meaning. Pair B did not interact as expected, compiling the lowest scores in every category, defeating the purpose of the ICT, and implying that students' discourse styles should be considered when assigning partners for ICTs.

The Importance of Discourse Style in Pairing Students for Interactive Communicative Tasks

With the emphasis in second language education turning toward communicative competence, interactive communicative tasks (ICTs) have gained greater acceptance in the ESL classroom. Overcoming a checkered past, group discussion has joined the curriculum under the more prestigious name. Once thought of as free time by the students and as grading time by the teachers, this class activity has evolved through research and careful application to earn its rightful place in the ESL classroom. Although the evolution has not been smooth, almost all ESL practitioners and theorists accept the premise that the benefit of small group interaction results from placing students in a position to use more of the target language than is possible with teacher-centered activities.

Proponents of small group interaction include Yule, Powers, & Macdonald (1992) who list researchers involved in studying task-based learning for various purposes, including Candlin's 1987 study specifically aimed at the incorporation of ICTs into the syllabus and Tarone & Yule's 1989 study aimed at measuring communicative competence gained through speaking and listening tasks. Further support comes from Nunan's Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom (1989), which provides teachers with instructions for implementing ICTs. Such extensive effort on the part of these researchers implies that ICTs provide a pedagogical technique well grounded in theory.

However, the practitioners' strategic manipulation of

variables inherent in the situation bears responsibility for the success or failure of the activity as it is realized in the classroom. Krashen (1987), emphasizing the process of language acquisition, defends the indispensability of comprehensible input and low affective filters in achieving communicative competence through classroom interaction by contending that other variables, such as age and length of exposure to the target language, "can better be explained in terms of comprehensible input plus filter level" (p. 33). The theory that other variables are subsumed by comprehensible input and filter level stresses the importance of context in planning ICTs.

Savignon (1991) suggests that research in the use of ICTs address learner styles and the effect of context, such as setting and roles, with the hope that better understanding will offer the "potential for improving classroom practice of the needed skills" (p. 270). She continues by arguing that "little systematic inquiry has been conducted into the instructional perceptions and practices of teachers" (p. 272) as planners of the ICTs. Doughty and Pica (1986) and Pica (1987) also stress the importance of teacher planning in setting up the conditions for using ICTs in second language classrooms, noting that one problem is the tendency of assertive students to dominate the interaction in small group discussions. Since research conducted by Alvarado (1992), Long (1981), Krashen (1987), and Doughty & Pica (1986) indicates that students' negotiation of meaning during ICTs

increases their proficiency, a situation in which all students interact to create comprehensibility provides the most efficient use of class time.

The concerns that these researchers have expressed about the effect of learner styles, context, and the perceptions and practices of teachers on the outcome of ICTs motivated the following study, loosely based on Alvarado's brief report of the pilot study for her doctoral dissertation. The focus of the study was to examine the discourse produced during the process of dyadic ICTs performed by four different configurations of student pairs, mixing and matching active and non-active discourse styles. Two major questions were addressed: First, does pairing students with similar discourse styles affect the outcome of ICTs, and conversely does pairing students with different discourse styles affect the outcome of ICTs? The aim of the study was to discover which configuration of pair assignments produced the greatest opportunity for collaborative negotiation of meaning: the chief purpose for including ICTs in the ESL curriculum.

Methods

Eight international students were selected from freshman level English grammar and composition classes using Alvarado's (1992) method of selection to isolate students with active and non-active discourse styles. The method

required the ESL teacher to list the ten students that she perceived to be the most and least active members of the class. Since the teacher had been teaching ESL students for twelve years and working with these particular students for three months, compiling this list did not present a problem. The active students were selected because their high participation level in class exemplified what could also be called assertive discourse styles, suggesting low affective filters displayed by high motivation, self-confidence, and low anxiety. The non-active students were selected because their low participation level exemplified non-assertive discourse styles, suggesting high affective filters displayed by low motivation, lack of self-confidence, and high anxiety (Krashen, 1987, pp. 30-32).

From the ten students on this list, the students with the closest scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) were selected. Although the TOEFL does not specifically measure communicative competence, the scores were used to indicate that the subjects' proficiency levels were similar. The scores of the subjects ranged from 500 to 530, with no correlation between the discourse styles and the TOEFL scores.

No requirement was set for the selection of subjects that considered variables, such as gender, age, country of origin, or exposure to the target language. Although Judd (1983, cited in Pearson and Lee, 1992, p. 124) points out that gender as a sociolinguistic variable needs to be treated

in the ESL syllabus, Pearson and Lee suggest that too much emphasis may perpetuate gender differences; therefore, this study avoided making gender an issue. The subjects were paired randomly in an attempt to make discourse style the salient variable. However, it is interesting to note that the discourse style ranking list prepared by the ESL teacher included an equal number of males and females in the active and non-active positions, so the selection process provided four female subjects and four male subjects.

The ages of the subjects ranged from nineteen to twenty-three years. All eight students had been in the United States for a period of three to four months during which time they were enrolled at the University of Central Oklahoma. They had a variety of language backgrounds and varying levels of exposure to the target language. Overall, the subjects' differences reflected the typical ESL classroom population from which the teachers must draw to assign roles and partners for ICTs.

After the selection process, the subjects were assigned to pairs as indicated in Table I. The students were placed in these four specific dyadic configurations to allow both types of students, active and non-active, an opportunity to perform in each role: sender and receiver of the information. In addition, the non-active senders had the opportunity to direct each type of receiver, active and non-active.

Table I

Pair Assignments

Role:	Sender	Receiver
Pair A:	Active Student	Active Student
Pair B:	Non-active Student	Non-active Student
Pair C:	Active Student	Non-active Student
Pair D:	Non-active Student	Active Student

The ICT assigned to the four pairs of students was to draw a replica of a simple figure using only verbal communication. The figure, a copy of which is included in Appendix B, included seven different parts. Each pair was given a time limit of five minutes to complete the task. No hand motions were allowed although the participants could see each other as they were seated in student desks facing each other with a taller long table separating the two desks. The actual drawing was done on the lower surface of the table attached to the student desk and obscured from the view of the sender. The participants were instructed as follows:

> You will be the sender, and you will be the receiver. I will give the sender a drawing of a simple figure. The sender will give the receiver directions for drawing the figure. You want the figures to be as similar as possible. Both the sender and receiver may talk, but neither may use hand motions. You have a five minute limit. Begin.

The discourse of all four pairs was audiotaped, and the

recordings were transcribed to produce the data for the study. Each participant's utterances were divided into T units and fragments which were tabulated and analyzed according to a modification of the three aspects of discourse categorized by Alvarado as follows:

1. Conversation management refers to overt moves to control the conversation by regulating the other speaker's participation or establishing procedures for carrying out the task.
2. Information presentation refers to how much content each participant contributed.
3. Interaction refers to the degree both speakers participated in making decisions towards accomplishing the task.

These descriptions, presented in her brief report, were not specific enough for replication in this study, so the following modifications were made to her taxonomy:

1. Conversation management utterances direct the conversation through A) commands, B) wh-questions, C) yes/no questions, and D) repetitions or utterances with rising intonation contours and thus realized as questions. All utterances in this category require responses, therefore, controlling the flow of the conversation. Some examples of each type from the transcribed discourse are A) "draw a circle," B) "but what size," C) "do you understand," and D) "triangle inside the rectangle," and "and then."
2. Information/response utterances present information

through A) answers to questions described in the category above, B) voluntary contribution, or C) elaboration. Even though the sender has the only information at the beginning of the task, the receiver accumulates information as the attempt to replicate the figure progresses. For inclusion in this category, the utterance must contain information. Some examples are A) "in the circle," B) "it would be in the middle of the circle also," and C) "two to one and a half to two inches."

3. Acknowledgment utterances do not contain information but merely sustain the interaction by signalling the receipt of the previous utterance through A) repetition or paraphrase of immediately preceding ideas, excluding self-repetition, B) backchannel cues and C) overt acknowledgment. Some examples are A) "medium size," B) "um hum," and C) "yes."

This classification into utterance types helped minimize the error inherent in depending on the sheer number of utterances or words to determine which participant controlled the conversation and whether each participant had an equal opportunity to negotiate meaning. For example, participants may backchannel frequently because the controlling partner requires it, thus increasing their overall totals. With this classification system, those utterances would not be inappropriately counted, therefore producing a clearer representation of the discourse.

Results and Discussion

Overall Totals

For a composite representation of the totals compiled from the quantitative analysis of all four pairs, please refer to Table II below. The numbers above the division headings represent the three discourse aspects (which were explained in the preceding section) used for the qualitative analysis of the discourse.

TABLE II

Total Number of Utterances Categorized by Discourse Aspect

SUBJECT	TOTAL UTTERANCES	1 CONVERSATION MANAGEMENT	2 INFORMATION RESPONSE	3 TYPE OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT		
				A	B	C
Pair A	121	44	25	17	11	24
Sender (Active)	62	20	25	5	1	11
Receiver (Active)	59	24	0	12	10	13
Pair B	24	10	9	2	2	1
Sender (Non-Active)	16	6	9	0	0	1
Receiver (Non-Active)	8	4	0	2	2	0
Pair C	83	24	20	16	8	15
Sender (Active)	49	17	20	3	2	7
Receiver (Non-Active)	34	7	0	13	6	8
Pair D	88	46	21	7	1	13
Sender (Non-Active)	48	16	21	3	1	7
Receiver (Active)	40	30	0	4	0	6

The overall totals for each pair in the first column of Table II, reveal that pair A, composed of a sender and a

receiver both included on the list of the five most active students in the class, had the highest score with a total of 121 utterances produced during the five minute limit. In contrast, pair B, in which both the sender and receiver were listed among the least active students in the class, totalled only twenty-four utterances. The total number of utterances for pairs C and D, both of which included students with differently perceived discourse styles, were eighty-three and eighty-eight respectively.

A comparison of these overall totals provides evidence to support Alvarado's theory that pairing students with nonassertive discourse styles would not improve the quantity of their participation because pair B (both classified as non-active) produced only eight percent of the total number of utterances for all pairs combined. This low percentage illustrates an intricate problem for non-active students. They are reluctant to participate in the ICTs that provide the type of controlled communication practice that they most need.

Although pair B did not meet the expectations of the ICT, pair A, in which both partners were active students with similar discourse styles, and pairs C and D, in which students with different discourse styles were mixed, did meet the expectations of the ICT by producing a sufficient number of utterances to demonstrate effective interaction. The higher scores of the non-active students in the mixed pairs provide some hope for motivating non-active students by

assigning them active partners.

Pair A

In the category of conversation management, the partners in pair A were only three points apart, the closest of any pair in this category. Pair A worked together most of the time; however, at some points of the conversation, they competed for control. For example, the following excerpt illustrates a bid by R to change the measurement from inches to centimeters:

S: okay the first step is draw a circle a big circle which is about four inches of diameter - right in the middle of the page

R: four inch

S: four inches yes in diameter in the middle

R: how many c m

S: four inches - of diameter

R: four inch four inch . . . okay

This attempt is not accepted by S, so R acquiesces, and they continue. Another attempt to seize control ends when S uses the synonym medium in the following excerpt to replace middle used by R who had appeared to be seizing control of the discourse.

R: okay um hum big one or small one

S: uh

R: or mid middle size

S: a medium sized one

R: medium size

Utterances for the discourse aspect of information response numbered twenty-five for the sender and zero for the receiver. The possibility did exist for the sender to ask for information about the figure that the receiver was in the process of drawing; for example, the sender could have asked what the receiver had already drawn and where the various pieces of the figure were located on the paper. However neither the students in this pair nor the other pairs attempted this strategy. Perhaps their assigned roles constrained them.

In the classification of utterances used to acknowledge the other partner's response, pair A outnumbered any other pair with a grand total of 52, which included paraphrases and repetition, backchannel cues, and overt acknowledgment. This pair did not ignore the fact that to accomplish the task, they had to work together. Their cooperation was apparent as they checked with each other frequently, seeking acknowledgment:

S: do you understand what I'm saying

R: yes

S: okay

R: yes

The foremost goal of ICTs is, of course, the process of constructing discourse to promote negotiation of meaning; however, the product, in this study the figure, created as a result of the meaning negotiated by the partners can provide empirical evidence of the success or failure of the transfer

of the appropriate information. Therefore, the figure produced by pair A is included in Appendix B. The only flaw in their figure was the placement of the arrow, providing proof that the transfer of the majority of the information was successful. Overall, for this pair, the purpose of the activity--to negotiate meaning and thereby improve fluency in conversational competence--was accomplished.

Pair B

The outcome for pair B was not so impressive. Similar to the results reported by Alvarado, neither sender nor receiver in pair B took an active role in completing the task by cooperating with each other through verbal strategies to reproduce the figure. The total utterances dedicated to conversation management numbered only ten because interaction was limited. Varonis and Gass (1983) discovered that the receiver was much more likely to attempt to negotiate meaning than the sender (cited in Doughty & Pica, 1986). However, the sender in this pair of non-active students did not recognize the receiver's position as negotiator. Instead the sender failed to reply adequately or appropriately to the receiver's requests, as exemplified below:

S: rectangle and uh . . . on the central of rectangle is a . . . a spot and uh left hand side is a edge of triangle -behind the triangle is a one rec- rectangle

R: uh repeat please

S: uh below-below the triangle but near the triangle

> . . . below the triangle but near the triangle on the left end side - at the edge at the edge of triangle is one rectangle . . . con connect connect the the line from the the gray part uh for forward to northeast northeast side and over over uh uh northeast corner on the paper . . .

The sender continued speeding through the directions, not complying with the receiver's plea for repetition. Rephrasing the first directive beyond recognition was confusing enough, but after that the sender plunged ahead with a barrage of new information. Nunan contends that the recognition of the receiver as the primary concern for success in communication is fundamental in successful interaction. In the discourse of Pair B it is evident that the sender did not consider the receiver. In fact, the sender so ignored the receiver that in conceding, the pronoun I, not we, was used:

S: and then uh . . . draw a square connect connect the line uh there's one one arrow on the the tri triangle . . . give up . . . I give up

Moreover, the receiver did not assertively seek responses to requests, sometimes even giving up before completing the request as illustrated by this excerpt:

R: how do . . . oh

The similar nonassertive discourse styles of these

participants contributed to the ineffectiveness of this activity to provide an opportunity for the negotiation of meaning, the main objective.

The non-active partners in Pair B were unable to successfully complete the task. In fact, they gave up very quickly. The figure that they produced, included in Appendix B, reflects their confusion. Of the seven individual pieces in the figure, pair B placed only three in the proper relationship with one another and the placement of these pieces on the paper was incorrect.

Pair C

The students with different discourse styles in Pair C, which had the active student in the role of sender and the non-active student in the role of receiver, produced results that paralleled Alvarado's findings that active students dominated their nonactive partners by controlling the conversation. In this pair, the active student was in the most powerful position as the possessor of the information; consequently, seventeen of the twenty-four utterances devoted to conversation management were made by the active sender.

Conversely, in the category of acknowledgment, the non-active receiver scored twenty-seven as opposed to only twelve for the active sender who used most of the turns available to manage the conversation and respond. The sender required acknowledgment from the receiver by pausing and sometimes verbally requesting acknowledgment; the receiver complied using all three methods listed under the heading labeled

acknowledgment as illustrated by these categorized excerpts:

3. A. Repetition:

S: yes you draw the slant through the center of the paper

R: the paper

S: yes

3.B. Backchannel Cues

S: the small square

R: um hum

S: is the top of right side

R: um hum

3.C. Overt Acknowledgment

S: and then the - the lower side of the square has a slant through the center of the piece of paper

R: okay

At one point, the active sender instructed the non-active receiver to pay closer attention to the task:

S: from the corner the corner of triangle go back . . . the left angle have the margin side and the long side - right - you listen to me - have the short side and long side

R: uh huh (realized as phonetically prominent and categorized under 3.C. Overt acknowledgment)

In the dialog reproduced above, the sender paused (. . .), did not receive an acknowledgment, continued, then paused (-) again, after which the admonition to listen was presented.

The receiver responded with a strong acknowledgment and continued to provide the expected acknowledgment to the completion of the task.

This episode provides an example of the benefit of pairing students with differing discourse styles because the active student had a positive effect on the non-active student in that the active student set up a pattern of expectations for the non-active student and insisted that the expectations be met. The drawing produced by Pair C is also included in Appendix B. Although they produced six of the seven pieces of the figure, only three were placed correctly.

Pair D

The outcome for Pair D also resulted in the dominance of the active student even though the roles were reversed and the non-active student had the more powerful role of information giver. The active receiver gained control with the first utterance by beginning a question with the word but:

S: draw a circle

R: but what size

This wording of the question let the sender know that more details were expected, and as the discourse proceeded, the pattern that was established with this beginning exchange was set. The sender only produced sixteen utterances dedicated to the aspect of conversation management, but the receiver garnered thirty, mostly through the use of questions as illustrated above, but sometimes through commands, such as

the two presented below:

R: wait wait say it again

R: and then

However, the sender's score was greater in the combined categories of information response and acknowledgment with a total of thirty-two. As occurred with the other pairs, only the sender scored in the category of information response. Even with an active student performing the role of receiver, no information was provided by the receiver on the progress of the effort to construct the figure.

Although the conversation was controlled by the active receiver, the purpose of the activity was achieved because, similar to the outcome for pair C, the non-active student was forced to respond and negotiate meaning to complete the task. The total number of utterances for each partner was extremely close, forty-eight for the sender and forty for the receiver. These scores reflect an equality of participation, so the intent of the ICT was accomplished. The figure produced by Pair D, included in Appendix B, has only one flaw, the placement of the rectangle. The fact that pair D with the active receiver produced a closer replica of the figure than pair C with the non-active receiver may support Nunan's contention that the receiver plays the most important role in the success of the transfer of information.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provided support for answering the two major questions addressed. The pairing of

students with similar discourse styles and the pairing of students with different discourse styles did affect the outcome of the ICTs. The discovery that active students dominated non-active students in both configurations in which the discourse styles were mixed and that pairing non-active students did not improve the quantity nor the quality of their participation coincided with the results of Alvarado's study; however, the results of this recent study showed that the implications of the dominance of active students should not be considered negative.

First, the dismal results of the non-active students paired together should provide a warning against attempting to maximize participation with this pairing. Second, although Alvarado reported that the active and non-active pairs in her study did not produce equal interaction, the communicative purpose in this study was achieved by both pairs with mixed discourse styles in spite of the fact that the active students dominated. Paradoxically, it was their dominance that set the stage for the negotiation of meaning for both partners. Without responsibility for the management of the conversation assumed by one of the partners, or shared equally as occurred with the pair of active students, negotiation of meaning to complete the task and provide practice for the goal of communicative competence could not have been accomplished.

An unexpected result, the zero scores of receivers in the discourse aspect of information response, raised some

questions for further study. First, did the role assigned to each student confine the participant within self-imposed parameters? Second, would experience with the task type affect the participants' use of utterances in this aspect of discourse?

This limited study revealed that the increasing number of ICTs entering the ESL curriculum has created the continuing need for additional research to provide teachers with specific procedural techniques for the optimal implementation of these task-based activities. Lacking research specifically aimed at effecting positive results by the judicious application of tested methods, teachers and students may understandably return to their former perception of the ICT, once again referring to it by the negative appellation--group work.

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